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DEATH – SPIRITUAL

Background

We have considered (in Unit 14) physical death, which we all know about – it happens to us all and is a publicly observed and recorded event. Spiritual death is harder for most people to understand, mainly because they are unaware that there is anything dead about them: we think we are fully alive already. Yet we learn from the teaching of Jesus that in our natural, sinful state, there is something at the heart of who we are which is *dead*, and that we therefore need to be made alive by the work of the Holy Spirit. We need to be 'born again'; we need to move from death to real life, and only God will be able to change us so radically that we are truly living. The heart of what we are needs to be changed.

John **3**:1-21; **5**:24-25; **9**:39

Death a result of the Fall

This has to be our starting point. It crops up time and again in these studies, because it explains our condition and our need. When mankind first sinned against the Creator, death came in. (See Genesis chapter **3**, and Paul's clear explanation in Romans **5**:12-14.) It has continuing effects and remains a battle (see Romans **6**:16). We can never recover from spiritual death by our own attempts to change ourselves (in our own strength).

Life

We all know that we cannot give ourselves life. Life, including true spiritual life, is from God. It is found *in* Christ, but apart from Christ there is a terrible spiritual deadness. That is why we see mankind in its present state. (See Romans **8**:1-11.)

Prophets

The classical prophets of the Old Testament were aware and affirmed that spiritual life was known to the righteous, those walking in practical faith and obedience to God. See, for example, Ezekiel **18**:1-9; and in the rest of that chapter the ways of life and death are described. In Joel chapter **2** the promise of an outpouring of the Spirit is given (which was to be fulfilled at Pentecost; see Acts chapter **2**).

New Testament

Hebrew thought considered a person as a unity (see Genesis **2**:7; man became a living being when God breathed breath of life into him). However, mind [Greek: *psuche*] and spirit [*pneuma*] are referred to in Scripture, as well as body [*soma*]. How these distinctions operate and what is signified by each is too large a study to embark upon here.¹ Scholars are divided as to whether 'soul' and the human 'spirit' are best described as distinct or as essentially signifying the non-physical aspect of a human being by both terms. When Jesus said, "*Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell*" (see Matthew **10**:28), we see that the soul must survive death to be in that terrible state (as well as there being a 'body'). Different books of the New Testament allow for some interchangeability of terms. Thus in the Epistle to the Hebrews, those who have died are sometimes called 'spirits' (Hebrews **12**:23), and in 1 Peter **3**:19, we read of *spirits* in prison. And in Revelation **6**:9 and **20**:4 we have references to the 'souls' of martyred believers.

However we understand the relation between the biblical usage of the two terms, what is perfectly clear is that the 'born again', Spirit-filled believer who is walking in obedience is experiencing eternal life (see Unit 12). We are aware of having passed from death to life (Jesus warned his own disciples of the risk of destruction in hell; and elsewhere in the NT there are warnings about falling away, failing to 'abide in' Jesus Christ – and falling back into sinful behaviour or apostasy [see Jude and Hebrews]). So spiritual death appears to remain a terrible possibility for a former believer who has abandoned his faith, rejects Christ and finally refuses to repent.

From Scripture it is clear that spiritual death entails eternal separation from God and torment, with consequent pain, sorrow, anguish and fire.

Yet the believer can always hold on to the great affirmations of hope for faithful believers in Jesus Christ. The New Testament has a great many such words of encouragement and promise.

The terrible truth about spiritual death

We have to be aware that it was Jesus himself who spelt out the consequences of what we call 'eternal death'. One writer explains some of the New Testament teaching on hell in this way:

It is a place of spiritual death. It is called 'the second death'. Death is separation. Hell is separation from God. It is 'outside'. There will be no worship there, for there will be no God to worship. Prayer will be equally futile. When all contact with the divine has been lost, the human also disappears. The image of God is totally defaced. Personal disintegration inevitably follows.

The absence of God is matched in horror by the presence of Satan, the source of all evil. Thousands of his 'angels' (since their rebellion against heaven, they are known as 'demons') will swell the population, polluting the atmosphere with their foul thoughts, words and deeds. The absence of every virtue will be matched by the presence of every vice. No wonder Jesus addressed those condemned to such company as 'you who are cursed' (Matthew **25:41**).

In both the gospels and Revelation, the word 'torment' (*basanismos* and its cognates) occurs quite frequently. Akin to 'torture', it signifies conscious pain, whether physical or mental....²

There is much more that could be said on this subject, and it is sobering to reflect that the heart of the New Testament teaching concerning hell is directly from the lips of Jesus speaking to disciples. The fear of God is indeed still the beginning of wisdom for disciples of Jesus Christ.

Matthew **8:22**; **13:42**, 49-50; **25:46**; Luke **13:24-27**; **15:24**; Romans **5:12**; **6:16**, 23; **8:13**, 16; 1 Corinthians **15:21-22**; 2 Corinthians **6:2**; Ephesians **2:1-3**; **4:17-18**; Colossians **2:13**; 1 John **5:12**; Revelation **2:11**; **20:6**, 10, 14-15; **21:8**

¹An excellent biblical study of the topic is provided in *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem (IVP and Zondervan, 1994) p.472ff.

² *The Road to Hell*, David Pawson (©Terra Nova Publications, 2007).